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SUBJECT: FEBRUARY 4 GENERAL "WORK STOPPAGE": MOSTLY MEDIA SPLASH

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1. (U) SUMMARY: The February 4 one-day nationwide work stoppage by major labor confederations made a significant media splash but seemed to create only minor disruptions across Turkey. Two confederations did not, in the end, participate in the work stoppage, although they had initially committed to join. The remaining confederations still pronounced the action a success. There were no major security incidents. The GOT continued to argue that the TEKEL workers' situation is not a matter of their rights being denied. Commentators are focusing more on the nature of the workers' 4C status, and the Prime Minister's tone when he addresses the issue. End summary.

2. (U) Labor confederations representing private and public sector workers organized a one-day work stoppage on Thursday, February 4 across the country in support of the former TEKEL workers (REFTEL). The press reported that tens of thousands of workers participated in the act, but actual numbers are difficult to estimate. The Turk-Is, DISK, Kamu-Sen and KESK confederations actively participated. The Hak-Is and Memur-Sen confederations -- although they initially had announced their support -- did not join the strike. The Hava-Is Union for Civil Aviation workers decided to heed the warning of the THY administration that there would be consequences to stopping work, and continued working.

3. (U) In other sectors, the municipal busses did not operate in Izmir, and the metro stopped temporarily in Ankara. Tens of thousands of people gathered at Ankara's Kizilay square. Anatolia News Agency workers stopped work for one hour, as a symbolic gesture. Members of the National Movement Party (CHP) did not work. In Zonguldak, 7,000 coal mine workers stopped working and in Kutahya the boron mine workers also stopped work. Doctors across the country -- except in emergency units -- did not work, and in Istanbul members of all of the confederations gathered at Sarachane square. NGOs and representatives of opposition parties as well as artists and intellectuals joined them to display solidarity. In Denizli, workers clashed with police when they wanted to march to the AKP headquarters.

4. (U) Confederations pronounced themselves pleased with the impact of the stoppage. Turk-Is Labor Confederation President Mustafa Kumlu said that the work stoppage was an important warning to the GOT. He noted that the former TEKEL workers "woke up the sleeping

giant" and that the Turkish people now support the victimized workers. He termed the act as a success because people stopped working everywhere, despite the threats by the governors, bureaucrats and employers.

15. (U) Government officials sent out balanced messages. While Prime Minister Erdogan preserved his stance that there would be no change for the workers' conditions, the Labor Minister tried to portray the work stoppage as a "mature" act, but one which was illegal. PM Erdogan noted that 450 workers had applied for 4C status so far. In response to a question, Erdogan said the government is not considering interfering in the former TEKEL workers' protest until the end of the month, but after that it would have to intervene because the workers would be performing an "occupation." Finance Minister Mehmet Simsek said that TEKEL workers' continuing their protests despite the improvements the GOT had made to their 4C could not be viewed as a "struggle to seek rights." The Labor and Social Security Minister Omer Dincer emphasized that no services were halted despite the act of the workers. He reiterated that the government had presented an important opportunity to the workers, and suggested the conflict would get bigger.

16. (U) In papers today columnists discussed the issue of 4C status and argued that with coming privatizations, as many as 25,000 workers will be assigned 4C status. Fikret Bila, a commentator from "Milliyet" newspaper, argued that while implementing privatization, the State should not focus just on making money but should consider the social impact. He said that privatization decisions should be made while weighing the "social benefit-social cost" calculation. Rusen Cakir, of "Vatan" newspaper, focused more on PM Erdogan's comments, criticizing him for being overly blunt when referring to the TEKEL workers. Cakir said that Erdogan should stop complaining about the workers, and instead patiently continue the negotiations until he finds a solution.

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17. (SBU) COMMENT: The tension between the workers and the GOT seems to be rising. The government indicates it will proceed with privatizations and will use 4C status for all laid off workers. The protest of TEKEL workers has now attained a symbolic status, which can be used for political purposes. A semblance of inaction, as well as any excessive intervention against the former TEKEL workers -- some 200 of whom have begun an "indefinite" hunger strike today -- is likely to intensify the friction.

JEFFREY